

## Review of *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* by Sylvia Chan-Malik (NYU Press)

by Najwa Mayer | Book Reviews, Issue 9.1 (Spring 2020)

**ABSTRACT** Sylvia Chan-Malik's *Being Muslim* argues that Muslim women of color in the United States have historically engaged with Islam as concurrent rejoinders to systemic racism and those national and cultural patriarchies directed against them. Chan-Malik centers the divergent experiences and insurgent faith practices of women of color, particularly African American women, within the fundamental character of Islam in the 20th and 21st US. Through the juxtaposition of multiple methodologies—archival, discursive, affective, and oral historical—Chan-Malik follows her subjects' complex lives rather than inserting them within expedient political or academic discourses that often subsume the intersectional politics of US women in Islam.

**KEYWORDS** African American studies, comparative race studies, critical Muslim studies, cultural history, media studies, women's studies

*Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam.* By Sylvia Chan-Malik. New York: New York University Press, 2018, 288 pp. (paperback). ISBN 9781479823420. US List: \$29.00.

Sylvia Chan-Malik's *Being Muslim* examines methodologically what cannot be forgotten historically: the fundamental character of Islam in the United States was shaped by African American people and the cultural politics of Blackness. Centralizing the experiences of women of color in American Islam, and Black women's legacies in particular, Chan-Malik examines how their "being Muslim" actively forms—intellectually, emotionally, and bodily—at the intersections of specific race contexts, gendered insecurities, religious ideas, and lived political structures. Chan-Malik argues that US Muslim women of color have historically engaged with Islam as concurrent rejoinders to systemic racism and national/cultural patriarchies through both embodied and social acts of faith and politics. Her sources draw on media texts, historical archives, and personal interviews.

Chan-Malik begins with a robust introduction to her theoretical apparatuses. First, we glean from the opening sentences that Muslim being/being Muslim are both ontological and performative, as registers of identity and creativity, politics and practice. Second, Chan-Malik argues that multiple feminisms—particularly, black feminism, womanism, and women of color/third world feminism—are central to narrating a history of American Islam as well as changing conceptions of US-based Muslim feminism today. Third, any representational and lived histories of Islam in the US must attend to its "racial-religious" formations, especially given how entangled American imaginations of and policies toward Islam are with state surveillance and militarism. She discursively links Islam in the US to

domestic Black Muslim rebellion before the 1970s and to transnational Muslim fundamentalism after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Finally, Chan-Malik turns all-too-familiar tropes of “radical Muslim” cultural insurgency on their heads by affirming the diverse agencies of Islam in the US, particularly for women of color, as practices of “affective insurgencies.” She defines “affective insurgency” as a persistent “againstness” toward white Anglo-Saxon Protestant normativity.

Adding to ontological, performative, and discursive readings, affect is important for Chan-Malik, especially as it relates the body to the world through power-laden encounters that negotiate everyday acts. She builds her “affective insurgency” not through the expected social-structural registers of the Raymond Williams school of cultural theory (i.e. affect as *emergent* social relations). Rather, notions of lived religion (e.g. Sherman Jackson and Carolyn Moxley Rouse’s works on African American Islam) as well as a determined focus on “modes of embodiment” (23) and “continual againstness” (18) (e.g. Sara Ahmed’s work on feminism, embodiment, and emotion) form the affective registers through which insurgent acts of faith and politics grapple with uneven systems of power. Chan-Malik convincingly demonstrates the conceptual value of “affective insurgency” to studies of women’s Islamic practice in liberal secular western states, where Muslim public archives and performances may be historically limited.

In chapter 1, Chan-Malik works from a 1923 photograph of four African American Muslim women in the Ahmadiyya Movement, the earliest major US Muslim organization. Attuned to the politics of black working-class women’s bodies, she reconstructs the historical realities and imagined visions of a particularly situated Black Muslim womanhood in the US as “insurgently” produced against the lived experiences of racial violence, class insecurities, patriarchal authorities, and Black Christian dominances that organized the 1920s Chicago landscape. Chan-Malik’s methodology is unexpectedly speculative, using cultural analysis (like singer Bessie Smith’s 1923 forlorn “Chicago Bound Blues”) to imagine what these un-historicized Black women experienced and saw—“a visual reversal of their image” (44). Reminiscent of Saidiya Hartman’s work, a critical storytelling approach excises the felt insecurities of structural racism and patriarchy that likely influenced these women’s interests in the egalitarian ideologies of Ahmadi Muslims. For scholars of early US Muslim histories, this model of cultural study can begin to approximate those experiences of race, gender, class, and sexuality in American Islam that asymmetries of power, culture, and record have silenced.

In chapters 2 and 3, Chan-Malik demonstrates how Black women in the Civil Rights era channeled Islam affectively as a “safe harbor” against their lived racial and gendered insecurities. First, using mainstream media representations of the Nation of Islam (NOI) in the 1950s–1960s, she focuses on Black Muslim women’s “insurgent domesticity.” Building from Debra Majeed’s theorization of “Muslim womanism,” Chan-Malik argues that NOI women’s domestic work is determinedly rendered as political work within Civil Rights and Cold War nationalist discourses that modeled the Black patriarchal family as moral and respectable. Next, using the examples of Betty Shabazz, wife of Civil Rights leader Malcolm X, and Dakota Staton, former wife of jazz trumpeter Talib Dawud, Chan-Malik reveals how they conceived of their marriages as practices of their faith—which also engendered their public displays of Black womanism in racial uplift and family security.

In chapter 4, Chan-Malik uses Leila Ahmed’s colonial “discourse of the veil” to consider a post-1970s “US discourse of the veil.” Notably, Chan-Malik’s focus is not on longer histories of the Orientalized veil (which, as scholars have shown, traveled with white

imperialism globally including through the movements and discourses of North American and European white women well-before the 1970s). Instead, she is interested in how this post-1970s veil discourse revived earlier stereotypes through both American media coverage of Iranian women's movements during the nation's 1979 Islamic Revolution and second wave feminists' internationalist rhetoric—particularly at the elision of US Black Muslim women's contributions to Islam. In pursuing solidarity with Iranian women, white upper-middle class feminists reproduced narratives of exceptionalist American feminism abroad while disregarding their own heavily critiqued exclusions of women of color and working class feminisms. What became most obfuscated in this exoticized discourse were the agencies of Black Muslim women within the US who practiced Islam as part of their racial-gendered insurgencies. These presences still linger in contemporary cultural repertoire, however, as Chan-Malik reminds us how recent gendered-racialized stereotypes of Islam in the US, especially through "radical men" and "victimized women," rely heavily on representations of rebellious Black Muslims in the US, especially the NOI.

Chan-Malik's methodology shifts significantly in chapter 5 and the conclusion, where she presents accounts of five living US Muslim women identified as Arab, Latina, South Asian, and African American. Rather than cultural analyses or speculative histories, personal interviews supplement biographical sketches of figures whose Muslim feminisms diversely bridge their racial-gendered experiences, faith practices, and social reform work. While the author's adept theorizations of affect are less applied to the oral historical texts, there is something humble and necessary about the different praxis Chan-Malik pursues. She begins chapter 5 with a poetic reference to "women's language" and an apparent quest to hear the voices of current US Muslim feminisms, which she argues are antiracist, gender-justice oriented legacies of earlier Black Muslim women's insurgencies. While the multivocality of these chapters is certainly instructive for a study that centers intersectionalities of Muslim-being, Chan-Malik's enthusiastic audience may read here the preludes to another book on contemporary Muslim feminisms.

Chan-Malik's *Being Muslim* offers rich approaches for the study of Muslim women of color, deftly layering critical feminist theories, cultural history, religious studies, and comparative race studies. The juxtaposition of multiple methodologies—archival, discursive, affective, oral historical—also meets the challenge that the author sets out: to narrate alongside the divergent experiences of women's Muslim-being. Chan-Malik writes, too, through a rigorous awareness of the social production of knowledge; that is, she writes with her subjects—following their complex lives—rather than inserting them within expedient political or academic discourses that often subsume the differences of women of color in American Islam. From such an interdisciplinary framework, *Being Muslim* does what all good scholarship should: it thinks generatively with its colleagues; Chan-Malik is in conversation with diverse practitioners of Muslim/Islamic Studies, especially in relation to gender and race, such as Amina Wadud, Debra Majeed, Zareena Grewal, and Junaid Rana. And, it invites generously future scholarship to think precisely about the politics that craft women's contributions to a "living Islam" (borrowing, alongside Chan-Malik, from Wadud). For instance, for this scholar, Chan-Malik's methodology invites queer approaches, questions of shifting racial tensions, as well as the active archives of contemporary popular cultures, where insurgent epistemologies of Muslim-being are yet emerging.

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Najwa Mayer is a doctoral candidate in American Studies at Yale University. Her dissertation and first book manuscript, *Muslim Americana*, considers the global mobilization of "Muslim American" identities via popular visual and performance cultures through theorizations of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and liberalism in the 21st century United States. She is a founding member of the North Eastern Public Humanities Consortium (nep) and has contributed to the curation of modern and contemporary work by Arab and South Asian artists in the Yale University Art Gallery as well as the Whitney Humanities Center.

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